

# DESCRIPTIVE RESEARCH IN ARCHITECTURE

## Designing atmosphere in a heritage building

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## I INTRODUCTION\*

This reflection paper is part of the graduation studio Revitalising Heritage Winterswijk within the chair of Heritage and Architecture of the TU Delft. The paper is written in context of the Lecture Series Research Methods, AR3A160. The aim of this reflection paper is to give an overview of the research methods used for the preliminary design.

In modern times, architectural design goes without saying as a discipline of the eye and visual media, although we are starting to realize that architecture only partly takes place in the visual realm. Steven Holl mentions: "Architecture, more fully than other art forms, engages out sensory perceptions. The passage of time; light, shadow and transparency; colour phenomena, texture, material and detail all participate in the complex experience of architecture (...) only in architecture can simultaneously awaken all the senses – all the complexities of perception."<sup>1</sup>

The lecture series research methods gave a broader view of doing research for a specific theme. New methods for research and ways of approaching and/or researching architecture have been discovered during this series. The lecture of Klaske Havik on spatial narratives in particular inspired me. Especially for finding new solutions or breakthroughs in the heritage and architecture chair. Usually historical research, building analyses and the value assessment are common ways of doing research in this chair, whereas the lectures series introduce new ways. The general way of doing research in the chair Heritage & Architecture is stated by Wessel de Jonge: "The design process typically requires much more preparatory research when working with built heritage (...) In dealing with heritage buildings, the design process takes its historic values and characteristics – established in part through careful historic research and building surveys – as points of departure. Historical and architectural qualities need to be assessed and interpreted into design guidelines for transformation; functional qualities, once identified should be translated into options for new functional programs. This is an example of so-called 'research-based design'."<sup>2</sup>

The graduation studio is a collaboration between the TU Delft and the province of Gelderland. The province of Gelderland started a research project called: "KaDEr", which together with the TU Delft try to define an adjusted framework based on the way in which the province of Gelderland acts up to this point. The project is situated in Winterswijk, a town in the east of the Netherlands in the region the Achterhoek, which is close to the German border. Winterswijk is originated around a creek and further developed around the Jacobschurch. Next this old town centre the Balinkes was developed in 1930 to household the different public functions, such as the postal office, bank offices and the townhall. For this graduation studio the former town hall of Winterswijk will be re-developed. The name of the former townhall is: "het Raadhuis", which is Dutch for the townhall. In this paper the name of the building is used to refer to. The aim for the design is to create a culinary place for the region. Designing a restaurant with a high-quality atmosphere that attracts tourists from the province or even the country, combining it with a hotel and a culinary school to connect better to the area.

To get a clear direction towards the end of the research a research question has been formulated:

*How can atmosphere be implemented in the design of a vacant building to help it revitalize the area?*

1 Steven Holl, Juhani Pallasmaa, Alberto Pérez-Gomez, *Questions of Perception: Phenomenology of Architecture* (A+U publishers Co., 1994) p41.

2 Marieke Kuipers & Wessel de Jonge, *Designing from Heritage*. (Delft: TU Delft, 2017), p29.

## II RESEARCH-METHODOLOGICAL DISCUSSION

To describe the research approach, I start from the first visit of Winterswijk. In the first week a trip to Winterswijk was planned to visit the project location. The tutors gave the assignment to make sketches next to taking photos and making notes of your first thoughts and impression. Sketching is a method where the first impressions of the place that stick to the mind are highlighted, which can be used to analyse the building. Pallasmaa mentions for example that if someone sketches a certain situation or place, the most important or essential features of the image are drawn. Although he does mention that sketches aren't enough to describe the complexity of architecture.<sup>3</sup>

The analysis phase of the design was mostly done with literature, archive and mapping. Literature mainly to get a broader view of what town halls are and how they were constructed, who the architect was and on various building typologies in the 1930's were analysed and compared to the Raadhuis. For the value assessment which is a big part of the research in heritage the Shearing Layers of Stewart Brand were used. The assessment of those values is in my opinion the principal research method for designing with heritage. To be very precise in what the values are and to critically reflect on those values in relation to the Raadhuis. Those values led to the starting position from where the design could take off.

To start with the design phase, the new function as mentioned earlier will be a culinary hotspot. Combining a regional restaurant that attracts tourists from the region or even the country with a hotel, cooking studio and culinary school fits the requirements for the area. Especially in the restaurant, which is the main feature, atmosphere is of the utmost importance. The distinction between an average restaurant for a city or town and a luxury restaurant mostly relies upon atmosphere and the experience.<sup>4</sup>

To get a grasp on how to express and help designing a certain atmosphere, the descriptive method of Klaske Havik her book *Urban Literacy* is enhanced, with a scope to phenomenological research. Phenomenology is part of the spatial narrative lecture of Klaske Havik, on which various architects have their own input. Phenomenology basically means how something appears to the human consciousness, how someone perceives or experiences space or an object. Christian Norberg-Schulz also reacts to this with his book *Genius Loci*. Norberg-Schulz explains *genius loci* as following: "Place is a space which has a distinct character. Since ancient times the *genius loci*, or "spirit of place", has been recognized as the concrete reality man has to face and come to terms within his daily life. Architecture means to visualize the *genius loci*, and the task of the architect is to create meaningful places, whereby he helps man to dwell."<sup>5</sup> In own words *genius loci* is a place where someone can relate to. Referring back to the Raadhuis, a place made from local materials in a style that fits the area. This is an example of relating to the spirit of place or *genius loci*. By conducting descriptive research into phenomenology, the author could reach the needed atmosphere with reasoning, which is gathered from different approaches of various architects and poets.

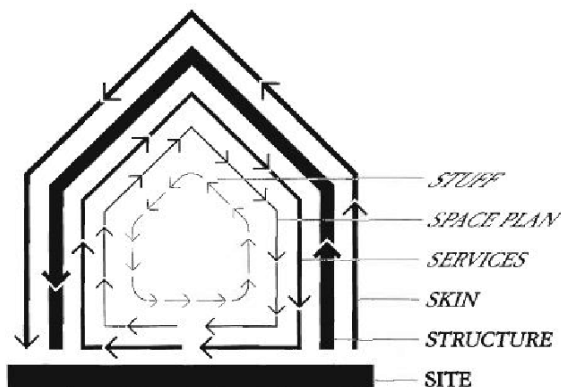


Figure 1 Shearing Layers - Stewart Brand (1978)

3 Juhani Pallasmaa in.: Klaske Havik, *Urban Literacy* (Rotterdam, nai010 publishers, 2014) p6-7.

4 Douglas Smith, *Hotel and restaurant design* (London, Hazell Watson & Viney Ltd, 1978)

5 Christian Norberg-Schulz, *Genius Loci. Towards a phenomenology of Architecture* (London, Academy editions, 1979), preface.

### III RESEARCH-METHODOLOGICAL REFLECTION

In this paragraph the historical and theoretical developments of spatial narratives will be summarized. This will help to get a better understanding on the methods and to form an own position on the subject. Firstly, the principal approach in heritage and architecture, the value assessment, is being reflected on. Secondly the phenomenological approach is discussed.

For both ordering the analysis and to value different aspects of the building the Shearing Layers of Stewart Brand were used. Brand distinguishes six different layers: site, structure, skin, service, space plan and stuff. All those layers have their own life cycle. He states that the layer of site changes the slowest while the layer of stuff changes the fastest.<sup>6</sup> Whereas site could be seen as the geographical setting and stuff as all things that are moved daily to monthly, mostly furniture. In the book *Designing from Heritage* by Marieke Kuipers and Wessel de Jonge (2017) these layers are used to give value to objects or elements in these layers. Kuipers and De Jonge introduce another layer to the list of Brand: spirit of place. This layer includes the intangible features of a building, since the others are somehow facts and therefore tangible.<sup>7</sup> To complete and structure the intangible features, the art values of Riegl were used. This provides a broader view and better valuation on the intangible. This intangible features are divided as following: age value, historical value, intentional- and non-intended commemorative values, use value, newness- and relative art value.<sup>8</sup> Combined this results in an matrix which is provided by the TU Delft, department of Cultural Values of heritage and architecture, for the assessment.

According to Havik a descriptive method means to describe an atmosphere or a space is usually related to an object. From a clear and vivid description, the reader should be able to draw a picture or imagine the description as if it were real. In an etymological meaning of the word, a description of a place is a copy of that place in words. Words that evoke the image of the described place in the readers head. Therefor to describe something the user needs to have the ability to be able to observe and perceive the object, space or atmosphere very detailed.<sup>9</sup>

Descriptive writing, along with sketching and drawing has been the common method of architectural historiography and theory for decades and was already used by Vitruvius, Alberti, Serlio and Palladio.<sup>10</sup> There are several ways of achieving an atmosphere that people can relate to. The human size like in a Vitruvian building people can relate themselves to the whole, because the building has been derived from the human scale, which mostly give the people a pleasant experience. The scale of the human body therefore determines atmospheric qualities.<sup>11</sup>

Although most architects nowadays refer to Maurice Merleau-Ponty and his book the phenomenology of perception. In this book he addresses the way the world appears to us and how do people perceive things and thereby he focusses on the role of the body experiencing space instead of focussing on the scale of the body like Vitruvius. One of the philosophical themes of Merleau-Ponty is the role of subject and object. Whereas an object can be perceived by the subject. Although the body isn't a passive object, nor only a perceiving subject. The body can be simultaneously the subject and object, it constantly perceives and is perceived by others.<sup>12</sup>

6 Stewart Brand, *Shearing Layers, how buildings learn* (1997)

7 Marieke Kuipers & Wessel de Jonge, *Designing from Heritage*. (Delft: TU Delft, 2017), p33-63.

8 Sebastiano Barassi on Alois Riegl. *A Rieglian Analysis of Values* (Tate Papers, 2007).

9 Klaske Havik, *Urban Literacy* (Rotterdam, nai010 publishers, 2014) p38

10 Juhani Pallasmaa in.: *Klaske Havik, Urban Literacy* (Rotterdam, nai010 publishers, 2014) p6-7.

11 Gernot Böhme, *On Beauty*, *The Nordic Journal of Aesthetics* No. 39 (2010), pp. 22–33

12 *Phenomenology of perception* Maurice Merleau-Ponty

Experiencing architecture is as said before not only a matter of visuals. Experiencing architecture and thus perceiving a certain atmosphere is multi-sensory; qualities of matter, space and scale are measures equally by the eye, ear, nose, skin, skeleton and muscle. Very particular smells create the image in our mind that fits with that smell. We all know the smell of the house of our grandparents, blindfolded one could imagine the space and thus the nose became the eye in experiencing space.<sup>13</sup>

Both the subject and object as the multi-sensory can also be sought in the Genius Loci of Norberg-Schulz where the relationship between body and place could help to relate people to the building. Norberg-Schulz pleads for architecture to be place specific. In his book *Genius Loci* (1979) he already states that most buildings exist in nowhere and aren't related to the landscape or even the urban fabric. The modern city is lost in all kind of scales.<sup>14</sup>

#### IV POSITIONING

The value assessment for heritage that is based on the matrix provided by the TU Delft, that combines the shearing layers of Brand with the art values of Riegl. The Raadhuis is a building with a stately atmosphere and look. To get a grip on how the atmosphere works nowadays the matrix is adjusted. First of all, as mentioned both Merleau-Ponty and Pallasmaa, atmosphere is a relation between subject and object related to the experience of the place, sensed by more than just the eye. Therefore Sculpture is added to the shearing layers of Brand. Sculpture meaning the whole building assemble. This is for utmost importance because the stately look and the craftsmanship that is present in the Raadhuis is tangible and thus part of the shearing layers in the research. This stately look and craftsmanship do not create the atmosphere, but surely take a roll in the atmosphere experienced in the building. The same goes for symbolic values, which is linked to the values of Riegl (figure 2). The symbolism of creating the brickwork from clay of the ground symbolises the building for that specific area. This is closely connected to the Genius Loci Norberg-Schulz speaks about.

Whereas Kuipers and de Jonge spoke of spirit of place as an added layer, I would see spirit of place as an overall layer. This connection can then easier be explained for example of the stately façade, which do influence the spirit of place but isn't the spirit of place on its own. Since the Raadhuis was built in the 1930's a clear distinction could be made between the civilian floor and the floor that was meant for the municipality. Because of this the different floors are experienced differently, therefore the final assessment is also divided per floor. Here could be seen that the difference floors have different qualities and values.

The theme of perception is addressed more in architectural debates since the 1950's, especially the criticism on modern architecture. Modern architecture lost its cohesion between the physical world and human perceptions. Not only does this refer to Norberg-Schulz but also to Vitruvius. Merleau-Ponty speaks more about phenomenology, how the human body could be perceived and how the senses of that body perceive other objects. By using the lecture of Klaske Havik on spatial narratives and diving deeper into the literary research on this topic, it became quite clear that the most architects and poets are surprisingly agreeing with one and another. Or at least they refer to others, making a little twitch in the philosophy and creating their own, as will I.

13 Juhani Pallasmaa, *The eyes of the skin* (London: Academy editions, 1996) p28-38

14 Christian Norberg-Schulz, *Genius Loci. Towards a phenomenology of Architecture* (London, Academy editions, 1979)

15 Klaske Havik, *Urban Literacy* (Rotterdam, nai010 publishers, 2014) p59

I do think nobody would argue that the Raadhuis is not in its spirit of place, one could argue that nowadays the towns and cities are so multicultural, it is hard to speak of a specific spirit of place. Therefore there might be multiple spirit of places for that exact location. There are of course historical elements still present and appreciated. But it is arguable that making something out of context could work and doesn't necessarily have to be without atmosphere or people connecting to it. According to Havik the term atmosphere describes the relations between subject and object regarding the experience of place.<sup>15</sup> Here she doesn't mention the subject and object in regard to the spirit of place, but to the experience of the place. I do agree with Norberg-Schulz, although since times have past since *Genius Loci* was written, I would personally change spirit of place to the experience of place.

Personally, I adore the way Vitruvius uses the human scale. Combining it with the knowledge gained by Pallasmaa and Merleau-Ponty on phenomenology, how things are perceived really is inspiring. Especially in restaurants the multi-sensory way of experiencing things can be very interesting and helpful in the design. All together I do think all the names mentioned above have multiple good qualities in their tools to think, design or do research about the perception or experiencing atmosphere. Combined I can continue the research into atmosphere for the Raadhuis and further elaborate its new functions, how they can interrelate, so the culinary hotspot fits the Raadhuis perfectly.

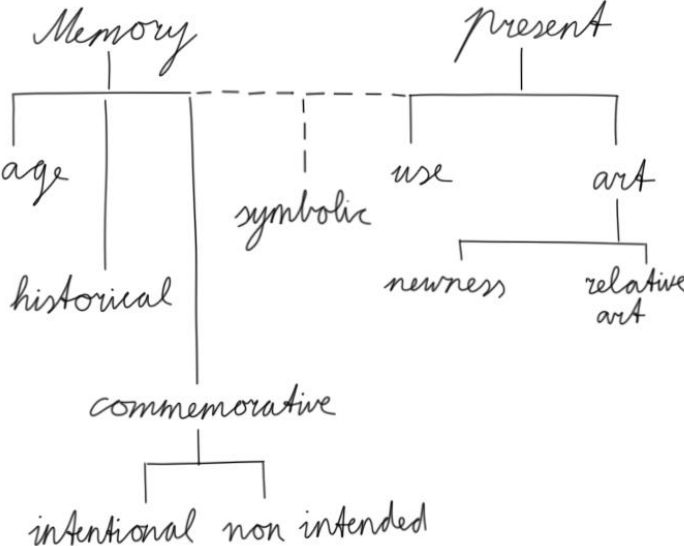


Figure 2 Art values of Riegl with own input of symbolism (own image)

## V BIBLIOGRAPHY

- 1 Steven Holl, Juhani Pallasmaa, Alberto Pérez-Gomez, *Questions of Perception: Phenomenology of Architecture* (A+U publishers Co., 1994) p41.
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